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ABSTRACT

Early efforts to reform middle-level education were characterized by the adoption of a set of programs, often those espoused by national advocacy groups. Too often such efforts were driven by changes in student population and adopted without broad participation by teachers, parents, and other community members. This paper relates the story of a midwestern district that made a conscious decision to work collaboratively with parents, teachers, and principals to identify concerns about the middle-level program and recommend strategies for its strengthening and refinement. A comprehensive task force was formed to examine the middle-school program, using researchers for this study as external facilitators. The task force was expected to collect data relevant to locally based issues and make decisions based on the data. These and other actions resulted in the refinement of questions that needed to be addressed, the specifying of how task-force work was to be done, and the building and maintenance of trust among members. The task force was thus transformed from a committee into a collaborative, working community. The district's review of its middle-school program continues with a task force that has matured and hopes to sustain community trust and confidence in its middle-school program. (Contains 33 references.) (RT)

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Early efforts to reform middle level education were characterized by the adoption of a set of programs, often those espoused by national advocacy groups (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). These initiatives focused on organizational changes and reflected a commitment by middle level educators to make their practice more closely aligned with the needs of students.

Too often such efforts were driven by changes in student population and were adopted without broad participation by teachers, parents and other community members. This lack of involvement frequently led to misunderstanding and mistrust of the motives behind the program changes (Clark & Clark, 1994; Beane, 1999).

Mounting evidence demonstrates that many of the recommendations for reformed middle level schools contribute to improved achievement and a more positive school environment (Felner, et al., 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993; Russell, 1997). Nevertheless, concerns continue to emerge in individual schools and local school districts about their appropriateness and effect.

As these concerns emerge school leaders face demands to engage school constituents in processes to examine their commitment to a middle level program. The most effective and sustainable changes occurred in schools and districts that worked collaboratively with teachers, parents and other community members to examine their school program and make recommendations for its refinement (Jackson & Davis, 2000; Williamson & Johnston, 1991; 1998; 2000). Starting a dialogue with all of the stakeholders in the community was seen as a very tangible manifestation of a willingness to work collaboratively.

This is the story of one midwestern district that made a conscious decision to work collaboratively with parents, teachers and principals to identify concerns about their middle level program and to recommend strategies for its strengthening and refinement.

Middle Level Reform

At the center of the debate about the middle level school is disagreement about its function and purpose (Beane, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 1999). Despite the widespread acceptance of the model, significant questions still emerge about whether the middle school provides a quality, intellectually challenging educational experience for students. Too frequently schools just modified their structure by organizing into teams, altering the schedule and implementing teacher-based guidance activities. For many parents these changes represented an over emphasis on social and emotional issues often resulting in lowered academic standards (Beane, 1999).

Despite the growing adoption of the recommendations for reformed middle level schools (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Valentine, Clark, Irvin, Keefe, & Melton, 1993;), and the evidence that the suggestions positively impact students (Felner, Jackson, Kasak, Mulhall, Brand, & Flowers, 1997; Lee & Smith, 1993), parents and others continue to raise concern with the model (Beane, 1999; DeYoung, Howley & Theobald, 1995; Johnston & Williamson, 1998; Saks, 1999).

Cuban (1992) described the community relations need this way.

> As long as schools have all the trademarks of what the public expects in a school, they are 'real schools.' If the public loses confidence in the district's capacity to produce real schools displaying familiar features, rules and classifications, political support and funding shrink swiftly (p. 248).

Proponents of the middle level school are passionate in their advocacy. Those who question the model's effectiveness are equally passionate. Therein lies the dilemma for local schools. How do they work to resolve the tension and restore confidence in the middle level model?

This Study

Local issues and concerns frequently drive middle level reform. Demographic shifts, funding changes and state accountability standards often lead to a review and examination of the program (Clark & Clark, 1994; Williamson & Johnston, 1991).

This paper describes the efforts of one community to look at its middle level program by identifying concerns about the current model and by working with stakeholders to recommend changes. The initiative was based on several central beliefs: the importance of collaboration, the value of using data and information to guide decision-making, and the importance of using best practice to guide thinking.

The Community Context

The district is located in an upper middle class suburb of a major midwestern city. Several major research and technology firms are located in the area and contributed to significant growth in recent years. Student achievement is consistently high and the district is recognized as one of the best in the world (Martin, et al., 2001; Mullis, et al., 2001) based on the recent TIMMS assessment.

The district prides itself on a long history of high academic performance and a continuing commitment to continuous improvement of the educational program. Although the district is recognized as a leader and innovator in many curricular areas, the district regularly reviews and refines its educational program.

Teachers and other school district employees bargain collectively. One issue that emerged in recent negotiations was equity of workload among teachers in the middle schools. Resolution of the contract included a commitment to establish a task force to study the issue and recommend a resolution.

Rather than deal with workload issues in isolation, the district elected to form a more comprehensive task force to examine the middle school program. The

committee began to meet in the spring of 2000 and was asked to systematically examine the middle school program and recommend ways to strengthen and enhance its delivery so that it would align with current and anticipated student needs and also address programmatic inequities.

Several contextual issues arose after the committee began its work. Each, in its own way, contributed to the complexity of the work and the need to continually recommit to strategies built on trust, respect for diverse points-of-view, and valuing collaborative work. As the national economy weakened, the district faced slower growth in its budget. Projected budget shortfalls led the district to modify or drop curricular programs and reduce support for other activities. The Board of Education decided to seek voter approval of a referendum that if successful would raise the tax rate for the first time in many years. In order to gain support for the referendum from an advisory group of parents and community leaders, the district and local education association successfully concluded contract negotiations prior to the end of the calendar year.

At the same time, the middle school committee, after nearly two years of work, prepared recommendations for reforming the middle school program. The committee found its recommendations immersed in district budget decisions and contract negotiations. Despite these obstacles, the committee persevered and continued its work.

Methodology and Data Analysis

This investigation utilized a modified case study approach (Stake, 1995). It examined in some depth the issues and concerns as well as the approaches to resolving those concerns in one school district.

The data for this investigation were gathered from participants in the review process, in the natural setting of their work. What Lincoln and Guba (1985) call naturalistic inquiry, others call a phenomenological approach. Borg, Gall, and Gall (1993) elaborated on the value of such an approach. It allows the researcher to "develop an understanding of individuals and events in their natural state,

taking into account the relevant context" (p. 194). Such an approach recognizes the uniqueness of each setting and is particularly relevant when the researcher wants to examine and understand a program or event from "the perspective of the participants" (p. 194).

The researchers served as facilitators for the review committee's work. As such, the researchers had first-hand knowledge of the issues and the debate. While helpful to have such ready access to the subjects, such access may lead to subjective bias. To minimize subjectivity the perspectives that emerged from this work were shared with committee members and district staff. Such "member checking" is a useful way to assure validity for qualitative research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If the researcher's reconstructions are recognizable to the subjects as accurate representations of their realities it lends credibility to the conclusions.

Data were collected in a number of ways. First, the researchers maintained detailed notes throughout the study. These notes were helpful in reconstructing the committee's discussion and debate. Second, the committee maintained detailed records of its work (e.g., agendas, minutes, planning documents). In each case a member of the committee, not the researchers, maintained those records. Each document was reviewed and accepted as accurate by the committee as a whole.

Data were analyzed to identify patterns of responses. This analysis revealed major themes. Documents and records were reviewed, using key word and trend analyses. The themes were confirmed and the field notes provided explicit details and examples to illustrate each of the themes and responses.

What Did We Do?

The district began its middle school review in March 2000. Before the committee began, several months were devoted to framing the task, identifying committee members, and identifying an external consultant to advise the district and the committee on its work.

Selecting members for the committee proved to be one of the most difficult tasks. Few people responded to an initial invitation to apply. The district's curricular office, along with representatives of the teacher's association, designed an application form and agreed on a selection process. Interested parents and teachers completed an application that included several open-response questions. A screening group, comprised of teacher representatives and administration, then selected the members. Value was placed on assuring a broad and representative membership form all middle schools and curricular areas. This led to a committee of nearly forty members.

Two staff from the curricular office facilitated initial meetings. These meetings were frequently contentious but civil. Members were unclear about the committee's role---was it to resolve the workload issue or to study the entire middle school program. This lack of clarity surfaced in nearly every discussion and shaped the conversation about committee operations, decision-making, and communication.

The co-facilitators remained steadfast in their commitment to collaboration. Ultimately the committee agreed on norms for committee operation and norms of collaboration. Those norms would prove useful much later in the committee's work.

The norms of collaboration (Garmston & Wellman, 1999) were of most importance. They demonstrated in a very explicit way a commitment to shared decision-making, to valuing all voices, to gathering and sharing information with stakeholders, and to working to study the issues and recommend solutions.

While not initially part of the process the use of an external facilitator to guide the committee's work was one of the most important decisions. Distrust among committee members and of district motives contributed to lengthy and contentious debate during initial meetings. Neutral external facilitation, with no vested interest in the outcome, proved critical to accelerating the committee's work.

The role of the external facilitator was key. The facilitator remained resolute in adhering to agreed upon norms of collaboration. The role was one of asking questions, provoking discussion, making observations, assisting in the identification of resources, and suggesting strategies for analyzing and discussing issues and resolving disagreement.

As with most committees, intervention was needed to build capacity among committee members, especially parents, to discuss, critique and debate issues with which they are not familiar. The committee adopted several approaches.

First, the committee agreed to focus on data and rationale rather than individual preferences and intuition. This minimized the impact of one member describing himself or herself as an "expert" in an area. The committee regularly asked for supporting documents (e.g., readings, data, policy and laws) in order to completely understand the issue.

The committee also agreed to collect local data about the middle schools. Rather than rely on national studies they chose to do their work based on issues identified by local parents, students, teachers, and administrators. A series of focus group sessions were held to learn from stakeholders about the middle school program.

Committee members also agreed to build a common information base about middle schools. A common set of readings was provided all members and time was devoted during committee meetings to discuss the readings and the implications for the committee's work. Every member of the committee was invited to attend the Annual Conference of the National Middle School Association in St. Louis. This trip allowed members to attend a variety of

conference sessions about issues of interest. It also contributed to building positive interpersonal relationships among the members.

The committee identified three central questions, based on the local data and their common readings, to guide its work. Posed as a set of questions, the issues drove subsequent committee discussions. The specific issues are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Essential Issues

1.	Choice: Do students have choices in their curricular program? If so, what is the appropriate balance between required courses and elective courses?
2.	Block: What options exists for curricular blocks? What are the implications for teaching and learning?
3.	Integration: Are there curricular areas that no longer offer separate and distinct courses? If so, what are they? How might they be integrated into other curricular areas?

Why Did We Do It?

Early efforts to reform middle schools focused on changing the organization and structure. Lots of time and energy was devoted to changing the schedule, to reorganizing into interdisciplinary teams, and to modifying curricular units (Clark & Clark, 1994). Despite these valiant efforts, in too many cases little changed. Teachers continued to teach the same way, principals to lead the same way. Classrooms and school operated the way they had always done.

In too many cases the efforts to change the school were launched because of demographic shifts or budget constraints, response to a national report on middle schools, or advocacy from a middle school "expert." This often left those responsible for implementing the changes angry and perplexed. Changes were made without involvement from teachers and parents. The emphasis on structural changes left many stakeholders puzzled as to the rationale or the expected results.

Much has been learned about school reform since the beginning of the middle school movement in the sixties. Educators grew to appreciate the complexity of change and the importance of local context (Fullan, 1993; Schlechty, 1997). They came to understand that no two schools or districts are exactly alike (Deal & Peterson, 1998). They came to value the importance of developing and designing educational programs in a thoughtful, deliberate and intentional way (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). They acknowledged the need to base decisions on data and information (Schmoker, 1999) and they recognized the power of collaboration with parents, teachers and others to build shared commitment to an educational program (Lambert, et al., 1995; Sergiovanni, 1995).

These were powerful learnings and important considerations in designing the middle school review described in this paper. A central feature was embracing the concept of backwards design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The district had experience with this approach in other curricular projects and had experienced its power to shape the conversation.

The committee did not overtly discuss backwards design. However, its underlying principles guided the committee's work. Early committee tasks included articulation of beliefs about middle level students and middle schools. The beliefs were endorsed prior to consideration of program characteristics. Significant committee discussion centered on identification of the results desired from the middle school program and ways the results would be measured. These conversations then drove discussion about program design.

Similarly the committee grew to appreciate the importance of developing professional community among its members. Early committee work was characterized by occasional self-serving advocacy, by members identifying themselves as an expert in a particular content area, and by creation of alliances between subject areas (e.g., academic vs. exploratory).

A study of collaborative groups in schools identified several attributes of professional community. They included articulation of shared norms and values, a collective focus on student learning, and collaboration and reflective dialogue (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). As the committee evolved it exhibited each of these characteristics.

The committee experienced an important metamorphosis when it focused on the creation of a professional community, one centered on improving the educational experience for middle school students. As a result of the strategies described earlier (e.g., gather local data, common readings, agreed upon norms) the focus of the committee shifted from addressing individual (personal or specific content) needs to a collective focus on student learning.

The shift dramatically impacted the committee's work. As individual interests were set aside, members began to consider a range of program options. For example, during discussions on the use of time the conversation changed from the needs of curricular areas to how the needs of students could be served through creative and flexible use of time.

The district was passionate about improving the educational experiences of its students. It espoused Schlechty's approach to change (1997). Schlechty suggested that school reform requires three types of change: procedural, altering the way the job is done; technological, modifying the means by which the job is done; and structural, "changing the nature of the work itself, reorienting its purpose, and refocusing its intent (p. 205)."

This model, embraced by the district and incorporated into many projects, contributed to the committee's design. There was discussion of procedural and technological change, but the deeper, more meaningful conversation centered on

structural changes---focusing on purpose and intent. This approach aligned nicely with Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) "backwards design" approach. It also meant that the work focused on student needs (e.g., instructional, curricular, affective) rather than adult needs (e.g., workload).

One specific issue seemed to dominate the committee's work---the use of time. Describing the issue this way altered the conversation. It wasn't about the schedule but about time as a resource, a tool to improve the educational experience for students. This focus contributed to the committee's ability to consider a range of options for use of time and to ultimately recommend an approach that maximized flexibility for students and teachers, one quite different from the present schedule.

The project had an immediate goal, resolve concerns about the middle school program. But other goals were also apparent. The approach to the committee's work, to its deliberate and intentional activity, was designed to model the collaborative practices that build professional community and that engage parents, teachers and school leaders in shared commitment to improving the educational experiences of children. It intentionally modeled practices that could be used in other school or district studies.

What Did We Learn?

In *Inventing Better Schools*, Phil Schlechty (1997) asserts that educators should take the emphasis off of the end product - what is learned - and focus on designing quality learning experiences for learners. If this is accomplished, then learners will not only acquire the knowledge and skills that the community expects of them, but they will also have a deeper, more sophisticated understanding of the content and issues. This assertion pertains to all learners, not just student learners. Once the district designed the quality learning experience, the committee became engaged, persistent, and committed.

Designing a quality learning experience for this committee was a multifaceted task. The researchers quickly realized that the committee would not

be able to focus on their work if they did not create a safe learning environment for the committee (Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993). To avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, it became necessary to make sure that an external facilitator guided the committee's work. In addition, the committee needed to make a collective decision about what information would be shared with their peers and when. Therefore, at the conclusion of each committee meeting, the committee as a whole drafted a communiqué. The committee also planned two district wide in-service meetings in order to share what they had learned. Establishing specific ways for the committee to assume control and shifting assumed leadership away from an individual were important symbolic steps to assuring the committee that it was a decision-making body.

The work was personally meaningful. The district administrator responsible for the committee's work decided that the committee would be known as *The Designing for Excellence Committee*. However, the pre-established purpose and name did not establish relevancy. It was only after the committee analyzed the data from the outside facilitator's report that members of the committee realized the importance of examining the total middle level experience. Through the use of data, individuals realized that there were no simple solutions to the issues. Everyone involved with middle school students would in some way be impacted by the decisions this committee would make. Therefore, the committee's inquiry became: "How does a middle school meet learners' needs for the new millennium?"

The group's transformation from a committee into a collaborative, working community was a result of developing a shared understanding of the need for continuous improvement. By working with data rather than intuition and establishing reading time during committee meetings, the committee developed a clear focus and purpose for their work. This common knowledge also permitted them to see beyond "what is' and envision what "should be." Developing a common vocabulary also promoted true conversation/dialogue as opposed to individuals promoting their own agenda. The norms of collaboration established

at the beginning of the committee's existence were important; however, constructing a common knowledge base was the essential step in becoming a learning community.

While it should not be surprising, the researchers were constantly fascinated by the committee's desire to establish clear performance standards for themselves as a committee and for their work within the school setting. Repeatedly, the committee wanted to know how the district/committee would hold their colleagues responsible for achieving the recommendations for "best practice." For example, the committee members wanted to know how principals would hold teams accountable? Yet, they realized that first they as a committee would need to describe the attributes of an effective team. It became clear as the committee's work progressed of the importance of identifying clear and compelling performance standards for all learners, including adult learners (Schlechty, 1997; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Frequently in the literature on school reform there is talk of building leadership capacity (Schlechty, 1977; Lambert, et al., 1995). What the researchers discovered is that all committee members, teachers, parents, and principals, developed or enhanced their leadership abilities during the committee's work. Teachers confronted one another if a member was violating the norms of collaboration. Teachers worked with principals to design master schedules, plan faculty meetings, or address rumors within their building. In addition, principals began to collaborate on how to hold similar conversations in their building, and parents worked with principals and district administrators to design multiple ways to provide the community with a summary of the committee's work.

Finally, the researchers work with the committee confirms what the literature on inquiry-based learning has asserted (Short & Burke, 1991). Learning is never finished. As the committee completes its recommendations for improving the learning experiences of middle level students, it is important to acknowledge that the process was just as important as the final

recommendations. It is equally important to recognize that the researchers have a new inquiry. If the process is as important as the end product, then what are the implications for classroom practice?

Conclusion

The district's review of its middle school program continues. The process successfully navigated early concern about process, persevered through concern about district commitment and budget priorities, and approaches its conclusion. It is anticipated that all recommendations will be complete in Spring 2002.

In many respects the committee's work and the foundation they built for restoring confidence in the middle school program was just the beginning. The more difficult task lies in implementation of the recommendations.

How does a district committed to continuous improvement, to academic excellence, and to a quality educational experience assure that the work of this group is embraced and used to inform district improvements. That ultimately is the test of any collaborative venture. Does it make a difference or does the work become just another report, among many, on bookshelves?

This group developed a shared commitment to improving the educational experience of middle school students. Their excitement and energy for the project must be captured and used to strengthen and refine the middle schools. Embracing and honoring their work, respecting the voices of teachers, students and parents will help to restore confidence in the middle level school.

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